

**Department of Veterans Affairs  
FY 2006 E-Government Act Report**

**1. Provide a brief overview of your agency's implementation of the Act, including a description of an internal agency-specific E-Government initiative.**

**Overview**

The primary mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is to serve America's veterans and their dependents, ensuring that they receive quality medical care, accurate and timely benefits, and lasting memorials. VA remains on course to enable the vision of One VA for veterans and their dependents. A technology evolution is resulting in new ways to deliver benefit payments, quality health care, and burial services, as well as to administer a wide variety of programs more efficiently. Central to achieving this transformation is continuously recognizing and expanding results-oriented electronic government, focusing on how government organizations can utilize innovative technologies to achieve their objectives and work together more effectively.

There are many internal and external influences that affect VA's mission and its accomplishment. Just as VA strives to present itself under One VA as a single entity to the veteran, the government as a whole is working toward combining functions across agencies to present a single interface to citizens through the President's E-Gov initiatives. The emphasis is on faster, better, and easier access to service for citizens. This means that VA employees are not only working closely across organizations within VA, but are also working with other Federal agencies to reduce redundant applications and processes.

In order to address veterans' expectations and better serve their needs, VA developed a strategic plan which contains the Secretary's priorities, goals, and objectives. Technology is the enabler that allows VA to reach the objectives of the strategic plan and ensure the Secretary's priorities and objectives are achieved. Essential to this strategy is an enterprise architecture to provide the framework for a One VA. VA is working to mature its enterprise architecture so that systems can talk to each other and meet user needs. In addition, the telecommunications infrastructure is being enhanced to provide fast and secure communication, and information security is being strengthened to ensure that systems are not compromised and that privacy is maintained for customers' electronic information.

**Description of Agency-Specific E-Government Initiatives**

**Electronic Forms Production.** Electronic forms production supports VA's enabling goal of delivering world class service to veterans and their families

by applying sound business principles that result in effective management of people, communications, technology and governance. With the VA Forms websites always ranking in the top 3 most accessed VA web pages, all VA forms that are appropriate for electronic distribution are being made available at one website. In addition, all on-line fillable forms are being made in a format that allows end-users to save forms and edit data as needed. This is very useful for forms that need to be filled out by the public on a regular basis and for internal forms. Users no longer have to request forms and wait for them to be mailed to them or ordered from the forms distribution center. This also allows veterans to submit the widely-used Application for Health Care Benefits application data directly to the facility they intend to use for VA health care, considerably reducing processing time. (Because these forms must be signed, veterans still need to produce a printed and signed copy.) All forms in this format are compliant with Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act. VA continues to provide all public use forms in paper media for those not able to use electronic formats.

From FY 2005 through FY 2006, VA has shown a cost savings by not printing new forms of \$100,000. The Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) share of printing of common use forms has dropped \$125,000 and stock replenishment has dropped \$200,000. This has allowed the VHA Forms and Publications Office to produce more information publications, especially for the newest veterans.

**My HealthVet (MHV).** MHV is the gateway to veterans' health benefits and services anywhere internet access is available. It provides access to trusted health information, links to Federal and VA benefits and resources, the personal health journal, and on-line VA prescription refills. This December, MHV registrants will be able to view appointments and key portions of their VA medical records online, and much more. MHV is a powerful tool to help veterans better understand and manage their health.

MHV, VA's eHealth web portal is a Personal Health Record (PHR) designed specifically to meet veterans' needs for a personal health record and electronic self service. PHRs enable patients to consolidate information from multiple health-care providers without having to track down, compile, and carry around paper records. By simplifying collection and maintenance of health information, PHRs encourage patients to become more involved in the healthcare decisions affecting them. Patients who take a more active role in their health care have improved clinical outcomes, treatment adherence, and increased satisfaction with their care. MHV includes robust self-entered information, personal health journals (e.g., food and activity journals, military, personal and family health histories), and health trackers (e.g., blood pressure, blood sugar, weight, and pulse oxymora). MHV has experienced growth in activity and registration since release of Online Prescription Refill on August 31, 2005. During the first year of operation,

veterans requested and MHV processed over 1,300,000 prescriptions over the internet. The site now averages over 4,000 prescription refills a day. The portal now supports over 283,000 registered users, and usage trends continue to climb. The following is a comparison of portal activity:

	Jan –August 2005	Jan - August 2006	% change
<b>Visits</b>	1,040,711	<b>3,623,289</b>	<b>UP 248%</b>
<b>Unique Visitors</b>	460,485	<b>1,980,061</b>	<b>UP 330%</b>
<b>Visitors Who Visited More Than Once</b>	97,258	<b>426,736</b>	<b>UP 339%</b>
<b>MHV Accounts</b>	62278	<b>133501</b>	<b>UP 114%</b>

MHV is part of Strategic Initiative 1.2 of using the PHR as an enabler to achieve a transformation in veteran / provider partnership to optimize veteran health. MHV goals are:

- Using MHV to support the dissemination of standard patient education, and clinical business practices.
- Using Information Technology to increase convenience and response time for veterans requesting VHA services.
- Increasing communication / collaboration between veterans and clinicians.
- Enabling veterans to consolidate and monitor their own health records and share this information with non-VA clinicians and others involved in their care.
- Empowering the patient to control what information is accessible by others.
- Collaboration with Department of Defense (DoD) eHealth portal TriCareONLINE to maximize VA and DoD resources and achieve a seamless transition from military to civilian life.
- MHV is working with the Seamless Transition Committee to harmonize content and entry points for returning Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve service members of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. MHV links to other Federal agencies and organizations that offer related benefits and services.

**Pay.VA Initiative.** VA has long been regarded as a leader in the Federal debt management community. The VA Debt Management Center (DMC) is largely responsible for VA's attainment of this leadership position. The primary mission of the DMC is to collect debts resulting from an individual's

participation in VA's education, pension or disability compensation programs by the most efficient and cost effective means while maintaining compassionate, high quality service to veterans and their families. As a trusted resource, DMC consults with veterans and their families in the management and liquidation of their benefit debts. In addition to VA organizations, clients include other government agencies, state agencies, and private companies.

In October 1993, DMC began accepting credit card payments by telephone. Operators had to leave their desks and telephones to run the credit card information through a point-of-sale terminal (linked to the servicing bank by telephone modem), then return to their desk and let the caller know whether the transaction was successful. The operator also had to enter a transaction in the automated collection system to update the caller's computer record, and complete a paper form used for accounting and tracking purposes.

In June 2004, the DMC implemented the online payment site. Transactions were limited to DMC Contact Section employees who received telephone calls from persons wishing to make credit card payments. In August 2004, the first Automated Clearing House (ACH) direct debit transaction was entered. Both credit card and ACH transaction input were limited to DMC employees receiving calls from persons wishing to make payments. In September 2004, the DMC received the first recurring ACH payment. In February 2006, Pay.gov was revised to accept government purchase cards and this was limited to DMC employees.

In March 2006, the public was notified of the availability of the online site, and collection letters were first revised to include the web address. The expanded use of this website has provided qualifiable benefits, e.g., the elimination of excessive postage fees; faster payment processing, potentially preventing credit reporting problems; recurring ACH direct debits that saves veterans time and embarrassment of missing payments; and reduction in mail handling and check processing labor for the DMC. The website is Section 508 compliant and users can also make payments by calling the toll free telephone number.

As debtors become more aware of the availability of the online site, VA believes it will help reduce telephone traffic on toll-free lines, giving operators more time to handle other calls. The acceleration of the dollar amount collected online from 2005 to 2006 gives VA reason to believe it will continue to accelerate, giving e-payments greater impact on total collections. ACH accounts for roughly 40 percent of e-payments. VA believes that the potential is even greater. ACH is the only electronic vehicle available for VA debtors to make recurring payments. Treasury has not yet approved recurring payments for credit cards. VA has had many debtors ask for that convenience.

## ANNUAL CREDIT CARD/ACH COLLECTIONS

Fiscal Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Total Available for Collection	\$1.29 Billion	\$1.32 Billion	\$1.4 Billion	\$1.5 Billion	\$1.59 Billion	\$1.7 Billion
Collections and Offsets	\$312 million	\$353 Million	\$368 million	\$406.8 million	\$432.6 million	\$531 million
Credit Card/ACH Collections	\$1,318,133	\$1,788,714	\$2,112,297	\$3,322,000	\$4,689,664	\$7,405,075
Credit Card/ACH % of collections	< 1%	< 1%	< 1%	< 1%	1.1%	1.4%

### NOTES:

The total available for collection and the amount collected and offset for FY 06 are slightly exaggerated by accounting methods used for the introduction of a new education program. Many military personnel and veterans switched between programs causing the establishment of temporary (and artificial) accounts receivable that were not actual delinquent debts. Funds from one education program were used to pay the accounts in the other program.

Until February 2006, our ACH collection figures included only the first ACH payment, not the subsequent recurring payments. While more and more debtors are setting up recurring payments, we do not believe the amounts that went uncouned were significant (all payments were properly applied to the debts). We do not count Government purchase card payments in our figures, above, since they do not affect veterans benefit debts.

**2. Describe your process for determining which information will be made available on your agency's public website and the Internet as required in Section 207(f)(2) of the Act.**

a. **Describe your process for determining which government information the agency intends to make available and accessible to the public on the Internet and by other means:** The [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) website provides Internet presence for all VA administrations and staff

offices. VA Directory and Handbook 6102 provide the policies and procedures. The content is being managed by a commercial content management product. The Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs is responsible for the content on VA's homepage and the decision of determining what goes on other websites to VA business and staff offices. Organization and categorization are also handled by the content owner. The VA website is fully searchable by any search engine and individual websites link to other agencies' websites if they choose. Information models are developed and implemented by content owners. VA Web content and technical managers must ensure their websites comply with all Federal laws, regulations, Executive Orders, and other directives and the Federal Web Content Manager Toolkit. VA continues to provide all public use forms in paper for those not able to use the electronic formats. VA posts required information such as the No Fear Act Data, privacy statement, etc., as required by Federal mandate.

**b. Include a copy of the priorities and schedules for making your information available and accessible.**

[http://www.va.gov/about\\_va/websiteinformation.asp](http://www.va.gov/about_va/websiteinformation.asp)

**c. Explain how and when such final determinations, priorities, and schedules were available for public notice and comment:** VA's Web Content Inventory and Publication Schedule was made available on the VA principal website on April 21, 2005. Public comments are acceptable via VA's on-line Inquiry Routing and Information System (<https://iris.va.gov/>).

**d. Provide the link where final determinations, priorities, and schedules can be found on your principal Federal agency public website.** [http://www.va.gov/about\\_va/websiteinformation.asp](http://www.va.gov/about_va/websiteinformation.asp)

**e. Identify progress to date for permitting searches of all files intended for public use on the website, displaying search results in order of relevancy to search criteria, and providing response times appropriately equivalent to industry best practices.** VA uses Verity, a comprehensive web search tool. The tool indexes the VA website incrementally on a nightly basis and performs a complete index weekly. All indexes are purged and recreated monthly. Relevancy of results is based on metadata, then content. VA Handbook 6102 enforces VA's compliance with the Federal mandate for the nine required metadata elements; namely, title, creator, description, keywords, subject, date created, date reviewed, language, and type. Response times for the period September 25 through 29, 2006, averaged 926 ms per request.

**3. Describe how your agency's information dissemination activities are coordinated with its FOIA operations in order to improve both access to and dissemination of government information to the public.**

**Your description must include a link to your agency's Information Resources Management (IRM) Strategic Plan and FOIA Improvement Plan.** VA organizations proactively disseminate information in coordination with their FOIA operations by making the information available and easily accessible in VA's Electronic Reading Rooms. For example, the Office of the Inspector General posted in VA's Electronic Reading Room, a 78-page document containing a review of issues related to the May 3, 2006, loss of information involving the identity of millions of veterans. This action not only served to provide critical information to the millions of veterans affected, it also prevented what could have amounted to innumerable individual FOIA requests. VA continues to encourage all VA organizations to recognize and make publicly available this type of information. It serves the dual purposes of improving service to the public while reducing the FOIA workload. Additionally, each VA organization maintains a home page that is hyperlinked to the VA FOIA home page. This allows users to navigate easily between home pages to obtain information they might otherwise have to request by submitting a FOIA request. The electronic version of VA's FOIA Improvement Plan is located at:  
[http://www.va.gov/oit/cio/foia/documents/Plan\\_Clean\\_6\\_13\\_06.pdf](http://www.va.gov/oit/cio/foia/documents/Plan_Clean_6_13_06.pdf).

**You must also describe specifically how you are fulfilling your responsibilities under three provisions of the Act:**

- **Section 207(d), "Categorization of Information"**

VA is in the process of implementing the Federal Enterprise Architecture (FEA) Data Reference Model (DRM) guidance. Current activities include developing and disseminating the technical implementation guidelines necessary to apply DRM principles, and monitoring their application; establishing the VA data architecture methodology which includes the requirement to develop all DRM data architecture artifacts applicable to VA data resource (taxonomy, data description, and information exchange). VA has produced and published several of the artifacts and is working on completing the VA DRM for the most critical portions of VA data. The DRM-related artifacts will be submitted to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as part of the next EA release which will go out in February 2007.

- **Section 207(e), "Public Access to Electronic Information"**

VA is participating in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) E-Records initiative project. This project involves working with NARA to identify and schedule all electronic records and transfer to NARA all electronic records that have a permanent retention. NARA has established a September 30, 2009, deadline for agencies to identify and schedule all existing records.

VA issued a Department-wide data call on October 17, 2006, to collect the requested information, per template supplied by NARA. VA Administrations and staff offices are required to submit a list of all electronic records and electronic records systems, including scheduling status (pending, approved, unscheduled). The information is due to NARA by November 22, 2006.

- **Section 207(g), if your agency funds Federal research and development (R&D) activities, “Access to Federally Funded Research and Development,” including how your R&D information is available through Radius, Science.gov, or other means.**

Not applicable to VA.